

Statement of Frank Wilds
before the
Committee on Economic Development
Public Roundtable
Tuesday, December 13, 2005

Introduction

My name is Frank Wilds and I am a longtime DC resident. I am active in and out of the community. Serving as ANC 5A-02 Commissioner, a member of the Lamond Riggs and North Michigan Park Civic Associations, and Vice Chair of Ward 5 Democratic Committee. I am also a National season ticket holder, and attended many of the games this season.

I am here today with DC residents who are active in the community and the political process. Together we voice our strong support for baseball and urge the City Council to approve the ballpark lease and take the necessary steps to ensure that the Washington Nationals remain in the District. This will also allow the Commissioner to select a local owner with minority partnership. And to put the District to work with him to create a partnership between the owner and the City to ensure a successful completion of the stadium.

Nationals' Inaugural Season

The inaugural season for the Nationals had a positive impact on the City. Their presence rallied the community -- white and black, rich and not-so-rich, young and the old -- to enjoy America's favorite past-time. The section that I sat in, allowed me to meet lots of people from different parts of the city, and we enjoyed the games together. The Nationals' presence also created a spirit of togetherness and civic pride that our City badly needed; we all had something to pull together for. 2.7 million fans came out to cheer their home team. Children are now excited about baseball because they are introduced and reintroduced to the game. We see some dilapidated fields being transformed into baseball parks so children can play ball and we will see more.

City Council members should not simply focus on the negatives, as some are doing, but also on the positive attributes that the Nationals have brought to Washington thus far.

We urge members of the Council to show some leadership and less political posturing and grandstanding. To say that the CFO or the Chairperson "hoodwinked" you, is to say that you did not do your homework. You should not be distracted by rhetoric such as "stadium versus schools" The school problems did not start last year; it has been a result of on-going problems over the years. It's not "welfare for billionaires" and "peanuts for schools". Yes, our schools certainly need financial help, but that need did not suddenly appear on the day the Mayor announced he had reached a deal with Major League Baseball. Honestly, you should weigh the economic and social benefits of building a new stadium for the Nationals. If the economic and social benefits are worth the investment, do it. I think that the propose changing of the deal every other day will not get the stadium done. Chances are the Major League Baseball will move to another city, with continuous delay.

Vision for Southeast DC

The City and the Mayor should focus on the possibility that the Southeast location can be transformed into the next MCI Center and surrounding area into a vibrant neighborhood with hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, retail, commercial buildings, and residential housing. Given the successful MCI Center-Chinatown rejuvenation and other cities that have built successful stadiums, we ought to expend our energy making the proper economic analysis to determine as accurately as possible if the proposed new stadium will revitalize this Southeast neighborhood and provide enormous new revenue and jobs for our City for decades to come.

The Redskins and Wizards Comparison

To compare bringing the Nationals to the City and building a new stadium for the Wizards/MCI or the Redskins/RFK is to compare apples and oranges. There were no other cities bidding for the Wizards or the Redskins. In the present situation, Major League Baseball opened the franchise for competition and said who is willing to give baseball the best deal. MLB agreed to locate in the District because the Mayor offered the best deal. The question for City Council is on the scale of balance: do the pluses for the City outweigh the minuses?

Decision before Council

Your decision should be based upon the economic and social benefits the baseball franchise will bring to the City. If City Council believes the amount of money required to build a stadium is a good and social investment, then you should vote "yes". If City Council does not have faith in the required investment, then you should vote "no". We urge the City Council to vote "yes" for the lease. Like the Southeast location, Camden Yards in Baltimore was once a blighted area. Today it is a destination spot. Whether baseball as an anchor occupant in Southeast will help develop the area as destination spot remains to be seen, but as history tells us, if done right, it has a very good chance. On the other hand, we could as Post columnist Tom Boswell suggested, continue to play at RFK and doom the Nationals to "third-class baseball citizenship" and risk losing the franchise to another city. Or worst, reach a "wasteful compromise" because "[n]o new park at RFK will ever have an iota of social utility". Let's make the decision based on its value as an economic and social vehicle, not politics.